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ABSTRACT

Those who are perceived as significant others influence the perceiver's self-evaluation. Age and gender differences in choice of significant others should reflect variation in cultural and familial values. On the other hand, if one accepts age stage developmental theories, one would expect consistency across cultures. In this study significant others of Australian and American early adolescents were compared. Subjects were 32 female and 45 male American and 74 female and 26 male Australian 10- to 12-year-olds, all of whom were white and attended Catholic schools in suburban areas. The subjects responded to the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Marsh Self-Description Questionnaire, and the Juhasz Significant Others Scale. Self-esteem scores of Americans were significantly higher than those of Australians. However, parents were more significant to Australians, especially fathers, who were least frequently chosen as important by American girls. As expected mothers were chosen most frequently by both males and females in both countries. Teachers were rarely viewed as significant. The major findings of this study indicate a trend for American adolescents to individuate and separate from parents at an earlier age than do their Australian counterparts. Fewer of them perceive parents to be significant influences on feelings of self-esteem. In summary, findings from Australian and American adolescents revealed similarities in choice of significant others but gender differences cross-culturally in some respects. (ABL)

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Significant Others and Self-Esteem of American and Australian Early Adolescents

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Abstract

One hundred and seventy-seven American and Australian 10-12 year olds responded to the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Marsh Self- Description Questionnaire, and the Juhasz Significant Others Scale. Self-esteem scores of Americans were significantly higher than those of Australians. However, parents were more significant to Australians especially fathers who were least frequently chosen as important by American girls. As expected mothers were chosen most frequently by both males and females in both countries.. Teachers were rarely viewed as significant. Findings are related to parent-child interactions, and early adolescent development and emphasize the need for adults to understand adolescents' perceptions of the role that they play in enhancing self-esteem.

Significant Others and Self-Esteem of American and Australian Early Adolescents

Those who are perceived as significant others influence the perceiver's self-evaluation. Their appraisals and feedback convey messages of worth and competence which are incorporated into the individual's esteem configuration. As we move toward the twenty-first century, impacted by the computer revolution and, in America, faced with decreasing family cohesiveness, one might predict a lessening of parental significance. This is a primary concern for those who work with early adolescents since this is a critical period for self-definition and esteem building. For decades, this has been recognized as having far reaching implications for psychological health and academic achievement (James, 1890). Exploring distress among fifth graders, Lewis et al., 1984, found that the highest scores for conditions which caused stress for children were, "not spending enough time with parents," "having your parents argue in front of you," and "being late with your homework." Higher frequency of occurrence of these chronic conditions made children feel bad about themselves. Recent research has attempted to determine who are significant to adolescents and what they do and say that makes adolescents feel good or bad about themselves (Juhasz, 1989; Watkins, Alabaster, and Freemantle. 1988). Age and gender differences in choice of significant others should reflect

variation in cultural and familial values. On the other hand, if one accepts age stage developmental theories, one would expect consistency across cultures. In this study significant others of Australian and American early adolescents are compared. Subjects and school settings similar in character serve to focus interpretation of results on details specific to 10 and 11 year olds, the population of interest. Self-esteem scores are compared also.

METHOD

Subjects and Procedures

The subjects were 32 female and 45 male American and 74 female and 26 male Australian 10 to 12 year olds. All were white and attended Catholic schools in upper middle-class suburban areas. In the Australian school, data were collected by the researcher and the school principal on two consecutive days. In the American school the classroom teachers administered the tests. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and then the Self-description Questionnaire were given on day one; The Significant Others Scale on day two. All students in the two samples were able to read and understand the instructions and the content of the instruments.

Measures

The Self Description Questionnaire (SDQ). The SDQ (Marsh, 1984) is designed to measure the subject's self-concept. For the

purpose of the current study, only two 9-item sub-scales of the SDQ, the Parent sub-scale and Peer sub-scale, were used, measuring the relationships perceived by the subjects with parents and peers respectively. High scores indicate a higher degree of satisfaction with the relationships between the subjects and parents or peers.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). The RSES (Rosenberg, 1979) is a 10-item questionnaire assessing the degree of self-satisfaction of the subjects. Each subject was asked to indicate the extent to which he/she was satisfied with him/her self (4 = strongly agree, 3 = agree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree). High scores represent a higher degree of the subject's self-satisfaction.

The Significant Others Scale (SOS). The SOS was designed specifically for the study (Juhasz, 1989). The subjects were asked to identify the first, second, and third most important persons in his/her life, and to indicate on a Likert Type Scale how that person made him/her feel (5 = great, 4 = good, 3 = OK, 2 = not too good, 1 = awful).

Analyses

Several t-tests were performed on the SDQ scores. Differences between the American sample and Australian sample by total and sex on sub-scales Parent and Peer and on the combined scale scores were examined. T-tests on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem

Scale (RSES) were also performed, to compare the self-esteem scores of the two samples and males and females in each sample. Teachers rated students' self-esteem on a three point scale (high, medium, low) and Pearson Product Moment correlations between their evaluations and student Rosenburg scores were computed.

Based on the identifications made by the subjects on the Significant Others Scale, percentages by sex and age group were calculated for the persons who were the first choice, and for the persons chosen across the first three choices. In addition, t-tests were performed by age and sex on the differences between the persons chosen as the first choice and the persons chosen as the second choice in terms of how they made the subject feel, as indicated on the SOS.

RESULTS

Results of the analysis of SDQ scores indicated statistically significant differences between the two samples in female parent sub-scale and total Parent sub-scale scores ($p < .01$) (Table 1). There are no significant differences between the two samples in Parent-Peer combined scores or Peer sub-scale scores. Nor were there differences on these scores by sex. The two samples did not differ significantly in male Parent sub-scale scores, therefore, the significant difference found in total Parent sub-scale was primarily due to the large difference between the two samples in female Parent sub-scale scores.

T-tests on RSES scores, male, and female RSES scores between the American sample and Australian sample suggested significant differences ($p < .05$) in total score (male and female combined (Table 2). There were no significant difference between the two samples in male and female RSES scores. Teachers evaluations of student self-esteem and their scores on the Rosenberg scale were positively correlated for the total American, male American 10 year old, and Australian female, 11 year old subjects.

The percentages of female and male American and Australian adolescents reporting a specific category of person to be (a) their first choice and (b) within their first three choices of significant other are shown in Table 3 and Table 4. Rank order of percentages was the same in all instances; mother, father, friend, except for the American females first choice where friend was second. More Americans viewed mother as most significant, as did more girls than boys in both countries. Fewer fathers were of prime significance to girls than to boys. But even for boys, percentages of fathers ranking first ranged only from 26.9 to 13.3, with the Australians more frequently selected. A higher percentage of Australian than American girls also ranked father first (9.5 v. 3.1). This difference is even more noticeable when the first three choices are compared; 86.5% of Australian girls, 37.5% of the Americans. Friends were rated as equally significant in both countries appearing in choices one to three for approximately one-third of the adolescents. While teachers were identified as significant more often by girls, for no pupil

was a teacher first choice, and fewer than 10% of all subjects placed teacher in the first three choices. About one-third of the adolescents rated siblings as significant with no national variation. Fewer Australians than American places relatives in the three choice category. American males accounted for this difference, 31.1% v. 15.4% of the Australians.

T-tests on the differences between the person chosen as the first choice and the person chosen as the second choice in terms of how they made the subject feel indicated no significant differences. Mean ratings ranged from 4.47 to 4.69 on a five point scale.

Pearson product moment correlations between teachers' evaluations of student self-esteem and their scores on the Rosenberg scale were significant for the total and 10 year old male American samples, and for the 11 year old Australian females (Table 5).

DISCUSSION

The major findings in this study indicate a trend for American adolescents to individuate and separate from parents at an earlier age than do their Australian counterparts. Fewer of them perceive parents to be significant influences on feelings of self-esteem. The expected order of significance, mother, father, friend, (Keats et al., 1981 with an international sample, U.S., Norway, Australia and France), occurs in both countries. However American fathers are chosen much less frequently than are

Australians. In 1976 Rosenberg found that one out of four of his American subjects perceived fathers to be of low significance. The Australian adolescents in the current study chose father slightly more frequently than this while about one in three boys and two in three girls perceived their American fathers to be nonsignificant.

The Self-Description Questionnaire, designed to measure adolescents' self-concepts related to parent and peer interactions resulted in higher scores on the Parent sub-scale for Australian girls than for their American counterpoints. Examination of the choices of significant others provides and explanation for the source of this variation. When mother and father choices are combined to form a parent category, first choices do not differ significantly. It is in the first to third combined choices that the Australian girls (about 94%) much more frequently include both parents than do American girls (about 63%). The low percentage of American girls who included father in the first three choices accounts for this variation. Some subjects listed only two choices. Demographic data on family composition was not used in analysis, however, in both samples there were few single headed households.

In interpreting the cultural differences found in this study, two possible explanations exist, either parent interactions and styles relative to children's self-esteem differ or developmentally, adolescents from the two countries are dissimilar. Related research provides clues but no definitive

answers to these questions. Kawash et al. (1986) confirmed the importance of perceived parental acceptance and autonomy for adolescent self-esteem. They noted that gender differences in these relationships emerged when both parents were considered together (When mother and father were viewed separately no such differences were found). For girls, high perceived parental granting of autonomy and for boys high perceived acceptance were related to significantly higher self-esteem scores. Subjects in this study were Canadian, Anglo from two parent families. However, with older subjects (17-19 years), Gecas and Schwalbe (1986) found that American boys' self-esteem was more sensitive to the control/autonomy aspect of parental behavior; girls' self-esteem was more strongly affected by parental support and participation. Father-child interaction variables were more consequential than were those for mother-child and affected boys' self-esteem more so than girls'.

Saba (1985) points out that children from nine to 13 years of age are in a transitional stage from childhood to adolescence; thus, while these children still have needs for security from adults, they are also developing needs for independence. Systematic study of males and females at each age from 10 to 20 is needed to reveal shifts in psychosocial developmental progress related to adult-child interaction and perceptions of self and others. A middle range theoretical framework which includes both symbolic interaction and social learning perspectives (Openshaw, Thomas, & Rollins, 1983) and the comprehensive conceptual

framework for the study of self-esteem developed by Juhasz (1987) would provide the necessary structure.

Early adolescence has been characterized as a time of change, physically, cognitively, environmentally and in relationships (Blyth & Traeger, 1983). Physical changes are poorly correlated with age because of enormous individual variability in timing and rate of development. Also emerging cognitively complex abilities during these years influence the ways that adolescents view themselves. Relationships and the expectation of significant others usually shift at this time especially if a move from elementary to a middle school environment takes place.

Most of the Australian children in this study had attended the same school since Kindergarten. Moreover, their parents were actively involved in school affairs, fund raising and meetings. This close cooperation of home and school, the stability of the group, and the protective environment could influence psychosocial developmental level and the significance of parents.

Isberg (1989) and her colleague identify psychosocial developmental level as an important determinant of self-esteem and link these variables to parental significance. They analyzed relationships between parental behaviors and 12 to 16 year olds' self-esteem and reported more frequent association for boys than for girls. However, the greatest amount of variance was attributed to level of psychosocial development. they concluded that the more mature adolescent appeared to evaluate him or herself

more independently of parents' evaluative comments than does the adolescent at a lower stage of ego development, noting a decreasing association between parental behaviors and self-regulation (p. 18). Perhaps the American adolescents in our study are moving earlier from Isberg's preconformist to conformist stage of ego development than are their Australian counterparts.

Marsh (1985) notes a systematic decline in self-concepts during preadolescent years. He posits that more extensive diffentiation and self-perceptions more highly correlated with performance and performance feedback account for this decline.

The higher self-esteem levels of the American sample could result from a change in the basis upon which these adolescents evaluate their self-esteem. If they view parents as less significant and self as more autonomous, competence in non-family related interactions and individual accomplishments could assume greater importance. This points to a critical shortcoming of measures of self-esteem, Rosenberg's included. The pre-constructed set of factors on which self-esteem is assumed to rest, in all probability, does not include those which are most salient to the adolescent at the time of measurement. Juhasz (1985) has discussed this problem at length.

Teachers, schools, and education in general have come under increasing criticism in the past decade. The lack of significance attributed to teachers by the grade school youth in this study is striking. According to Erikson (1968), competency

is a major developmental outcome at this age. It is also a key component in positive self-esteem. Teachers who help children to succeed in school should be viewed as significant and should make children feel good about themselves. Relevant child-report data (Connell & Ilardi, 1987) suggest that children's self-esteem is adversely affected by falling short of teacher's expectations. Teachers need to be aware of findings such as this and ways in which they can become more significant to students. Calmes (1984) identifies some of these, mainly related to helping children become more competent.

When teachers reated children's self-esteem level, American ratings correlated more highly than did Australian with students' scores on the Rosenberg self-concept scale. Hughes (1984) questions whether social desirability is a contaminating factor in this type of teacher evaluation. If so, the specific characteristics of the 11 year old Australian females and 10 year old American males in this study would be of interest, since teachers' perceptions for these sub-groups were the most accurate. It may be that these are, in some unique ways, critical periods in self-development and that certain interactions or classroom incidents are instrumental in facilitating accurate teacher-pupil perception matching.

Findings from the Australian and American adolescents in this study reveal similarities in choice of significant others but gender differences cross- culturally in some respects. Self-esteem was generally high. However, while Rosenberg's test is

widely used, it actually measures self-concept and his items may not include the factors that are really important to these adolescents' self-esteem. Parents, especially fathers, and also teachers could be much more important in their children's eyes. They should provide a stable value base in which children ground their competency and self-esteem as they move toward increased autonomy and independence.

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TABLE 1

Comparison of means of Self-Description Questionnaire Scale: American and Australian Caucasians

Measure	Mean	t	df	p <
Total Parent-Peer combined				
Australian	80.69	1.47	178	.ns
American	78.67			
Male Parent-Peer combined				
Australian	81.12	.12	67	.ns
American	80.88			
Female Parent-Peer combined				
Australian	80.53	1.62	102	.ns
American	77.00			
Total Parent sub-scale				
Australian	43.70	3.20	179	.00
American	41.61			
Male Parent sub-scale				
Australian	42.73	.10	67	.ns
American	42.63			

Female Parent sub-scale				
Australian	44.04	3.17	102	.00
American	41.16			
Total Peer sub-scale				
Australian	36.99	-.06	178	.ns
American	42.63			
Male Peer sub-scale				
Australian	38.38	.10	67	.ns
American	38.26			
Female Peer sub-scale				
Australian	36.49	.41	102	.ns
American	35.84			

TABLE 2

Comparison of Means on Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale:

American and Australian Caucasians

Measure	Mean	t	df	p <
Total Rosenberg				
Australian	31.05	- 2.14	181	.03
American	32.15			
Male Rosenberg				
Australian	31.50	- 1.38	67	ns
American	32.76			
Female Rosenberg				
Australian	30.89	- .78	104	ns
American	31.44			

TABLE 3

Percentages of American Sample Reporting a Category of Persons to be Their First Choice and Within Their First Three Choices of Significant Others by Sex

	Boys n.45		Girls n.32	
	1st	1st-3rd	1st	1st-3rd
Mother	66.7	77.8	81.3	87.5
Father	13.3	64.4	3.1	37.5
Sister	2.2	6.7	3.1	18.7
Brother	6.7	24.4	3.1	15.6
Relative	4.4	31.1	3.1	21.9
Friend	6.7	35.6	6.3	34.4
Teacher	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.3
Other	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

TABLE 4

Percentages of Australian Sample Reporting a Category of Persons to be Their First Choice and Within Their First Three Choices of Significant Others by Sex

	Boys n.26		Girls n.74	
	1st	1st-3rd	1st	1st-3rd
Mother	50.0	100.0	78.4	101.4
Father	26.9	80.8	9.5	86.5
Sister	0.0	7.7	0.0	28.4
Brother	0.0	30.8	0.0	12.3
Relative	0.0	15.4	0.0	21.6
Friend	11.5	34.6	8.1	32.4
Teacher	0.0	3.8	2.7	6.8
Other	11.5	19.2	1.4	10.8

TABLE 5

Correlations Between Teachers' Evaluations of Student Self-Esteem and Their Scores on the Rosenberg Scale*

Subjects	N	r	p
American male and female	77	.20	.04
Australian female (11 yrs.)	35	.34	.02
American male (10 yrs.)	23	.36	.05

* Pearson Product Moment was used in the analysis.